

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Broadcast Date: 10 June 2018

No.: T1045

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Proclamation of the Faith (1 Timothy 3:15-16): God has been manifest in flesh

Introduction

What do you live for? What is the basic purpose of your life? These are not things we get asked every day! Some people live for their work, others for their families. Some live to sing, or paint, or whatever they are passionate about. Some of us just want to get through the day any way we can. But what were we made for? In Genesis 1:26-27, *“God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our Image, according to Our likeness...’ So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”* It appears we were deliberately created to be like God. This has at least two major implications:

1. We should act like God and display His likeness to others; and
2. God created us like Himself so that we might enjoy a relationship with Him, and He might enjoy a relationship with us.

So, the biblical answer to the question “What do I live for?” is “I live to enjoy a close relationship with God and to represent Him in this world”. That sounds like a rather grander purpose than many of us aspire to! The purpose of our lives should be godliness, that is evident likeness to God and closeness to Him. The mystery of godliness was our topic last week, but how is that godliness produced? That finally brings us round to our topic for today, so I’d better get on with reading the key verses from 1 Timothy: *“These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory”* (1 Timothy 3:14-16).

“God was manifested in the flesh” is our topic for today, but I just need to go back briefly to last week’s theme of *“The mystery of godliness”* to make the link. We might paraphrase the start of 1 Timothy 3:16 as, “Great is the source of such as striking thing as godliness.” And this raises the questions:

1. What is the source of this godliness?
2. How is the likeness of God seen? and
3. How is this likeness reproduced in human lives?

The answer to all three of these questions is, “Christ Jesus”! Christ is the only One in whom the likeness of God is perfectly seen (Question 2) and He is also the source and producer of this likeness in believers today (Questions 1 and 3). 1 Timothy 3:16 is all about Him!

1 Timothy 3:16 has six statements which summarise the revelation of Christ. They take us from the incarnation, *“God was manifested in the flesh”*, to the ascension, *“Received up in glory.”* Knowing this Christ is the secret of living a life of godliness, and this is what the church and its members should live for. Godliness can only be produced as we know God, and we can only know God if He chooses to make Himself known. That brings us neatly back round to our topic for today, *“God was manifested in the flesh.”*

I’m going to break it down into 3 clauses:

1. God
2. Was Manifested
3. In the flesh

1. God

Our Bibles begin with God. *"In the beginning God..."* (Genesis 1:1). He was before everything else, is more important than everything else, and made everything that is not Himself. He made us in His own image to enjoy fellowship with Him. If godliness is being like Him, then it must begin with Him, and our knowing Him. But if our sins had separated us from God (see Isaiah 59:2) how could we ever know Him? Could we reach up to where God is, in heaven, and bring Him down? Of course, we had no way of travelling up to heaven, and no access into the presence of God if we could have arrived there! We needed God to come to us, and the wonder of the gospel is that this is precisely what happened. I said a few moments ago, that Christ is the One in whom the likeness of God is seen and by whom it is reproduced in us. That is so because Jesus Christ **is** God. Let's read some important verses on this subject from the beginning of Hebrews. *"God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high, having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they. For to which of the angels did He ever say: 'You are My Son, today I have begotten You'?"* (Hebrews 1:1-5).

God had spoken many times down the centuries through the prophets. He sent them to inform and instruct, to warn, to encourage, to speak of what would happen in the future and to call people back to Himself. The Old Testament gives us the record of many of those messages, and it remains a source of instruction and encouragement to this day. That was marvellous as far as it went, but it did not go far enough! It did not fully reveal everything that we needed to know about God, and it did not establish a way in which God could permanently and categorically deal with the huge problem of our sins. To do that, God needed to appear in person. That is why the Son came into this world. The Son is the *"heir of all things"* (Hebrews 1:2), that is, He has the position of an only son as the inheritor of all his father possesses, and is therefore able to speak with the full authority of the father. The Son is the one through whom all worlds were created. Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 make plain that God is the Creator of all things. It hints at the fact that God is more than a simple, single person when it says, as we have already read, *"Let **Us** make man in **Our** Image, according to **Our** likeness..."* (Genesis 1:26). The use of the plural implies God is more than one, and provides the first intimation in our Bibles of what, in the New Testament, becomes the revelation of the Trinity: God Who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and yet still One God. So, the Son is the creator God. He doesn't just possess some of the same glory as the Father, the Son is the *"brightness of His glory"* (Hebrews 1:3). The Son does not just resemble the Father, like many a human son bears a striking resemblance to his father, He is *"the express image of His person."* Not only did the Son create the world, He keeps it in existence. In fact, He does so by word alone, just as the original creation was by spoken words. He *"upholds all things by the word of His power"* (Hebrews 1:3).

The belief in Christ as the only begotten Son of God is what distinguishes true Christianity from all sects and false teachings. It needed One Who is fully God to reveal God, and to *"purge our sins"* (Hebrews 1:3). When this work was finished the Son could *"[Sit] down at the right hand of the Majesty on high."* This is the position of highest authority and grandeur, the right hand of the throne of the universe! For all these reasons, the Son is of a totally different order to all prophets and even the angels of God. All the rest were faithful servants and messengers from God, and this was a high honour, but the Son is *"God over all, blessed forever"* (see Romans 9:5). *"Of the Son God says, 'Your throne O God, is forever and ever'"* (Hebrews 1:8).

Going back to Hebrews 1 we read, in Hebrews 1:6, *"But when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says: 'Let all the angels of God worship Him.'" The angels will form part of the subject of a later talk in this series, but we are reminded here of the commencement of Christ's incarnation, when He came as a little baby in Bethlehem, and the skies were filled with the glory of angels, and the air rang with the praise and worship of God's messenger spirits, as they voiced their wonder at their God appearing in the world of men! (see Luke 2:8-20).*

2. Was manifested

That brings us to our second clause: *"Was manifested"*. The English word manifest, and the words that derive from it, came, via Italian, from the Latin word 'manifestus' which meant, to make public.

The noun manifest means a complete list of all the goods or people that are carried on a ship or plane. It is used by customs officials to check off exactly what should be on board a vessel. We can think of Christ as detailing everything that the character of God contains, right down to the very last detail. Nothing that is present in the character of God is missing from the 'list' that is Christ, and there is nothing on the "list" of Christ that is not present in God. But Christ is much more than a list, or description of what God is.

The word manifesto derives from the same Latin root as manifest. A manifesto is a public declaration of policy and aims, especially those of a political party before an election. We might think of Christ as the public declaration of all

God's aims and purposes, especially in salvation, and that would be true, but it would still be a lot less than the whole truth.

The verb manifest means to show by one acts or appearance, or to demonstrate, and the noun means something obvious or clear. Thus, Christ showed or demonstrated God in all His acts and appearance and, through Christ, God is made clear and obvious. That gets to the heart of the matter!

John 1:18, commences, *"No one has seen God at any time..."* Indeed, when Moses asked to see God's glory, in Exodus 33:18, Jehovah replied, *"You cannot see My face, for no man shall see Me, and live"* (Exodus 33:20). But John 1:18 concludes, *"... the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him."* At the very start of his gospel, John is spelling out plainly Who he is writing about, and how completely Jesus is God, and has therefore has been able to make God manifest, or plainly known.

Towards the end of Jesus' pathway through this world, Jesus says to Philip, in John 14:9, *"He who has seen Me has seen the Father."* There was nothing left to reveal. Of course, there is much doctrine and teaching concerning the church and the Christian life still to be set out in the epistles, but the revelation, or manifestation, of the character of God the Father, was complete. So complete, in fact, that in having seen Jesus during those two years or so of His public ministry, Philip had in fact seen the Father Himself. In John 10:30, Jesus plainly said, *"I and My Father are one."* There is what we might call perfect unity. Not just unity of purpose, although that is certainly true, but a unity of essence. Father and Son (and elsewhere Spirit), but only one God. This perfect unity means that when the Son is known, the Father is also known. In becoming flesh, Jesus made the invisible God, visible for the first time.

John 1:14 says, *"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."*

"We beheld His glory" says John. What Moses was told by God that he could **not** do, *"You cannot see My face"*. John says that he and the other disciples did! Since God was manifest in Christ, the disciples could gaze at Christ, and see there the glory of the Father fully revealed!

Further still, at the start of his first epistle John writes, *"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life, the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us, that which we have seen and heard we declare to you..."* (1 John 1:1-3). Notice, *"the life was **manifested**"*, *"that eternal life... was **manifested** to us"*. So, John can now declare these things to us.

The question arises, "If God was so obvious, so manifest, in Christ, why did everybody not recognise Him for who He is?" According to Isaiah 53:2, *"He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected by men."* How could there be no 'form', 'comeliness', or 'beauty' in the One Who was manifesting the glory of God? The answer lies in the **way** that glory was manifested. Isaiah means that there was no obvious, physical exhibition of that glory. Jesus didn't shine, physically with God's glory, apart from on the mount of transfiguration, and that was only seen by three disciples (see Matthew 17:1-3, Luke 9:28-36). He didn't have a halo round His head, like many pictorial representations suggest. He wasn't *"head and shoulders above everyone else"* (1 Samuel 9:2) like Saul was. It needs a work of God to open our eyes before we can see that beauty that John and the other disciples once did. To those to whom God has given faith, Jesus Christ is the most wonderful Person imaginable, and we can see the Father revealed in everything He said and did. To the Pharisees He was a threat and an accuser, and He remains the same to those who oppose themselves to Him today.

3. In the flesh

Those of us who have been Christians for many years, and are familiar with what the New Testament writers have to say about our flesh, may have a little difficulty with the concept of God being manifest, through Christ, in the flesh. The New Testament writers clearly had no such problem! We think of verses like Romans 7:18, which says, *"In me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells."* Or perhaps, Galatians 5:17, which reads, *"For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another: so that you do not do the things that you wish."* In these passages, and others like them, the New Testament writers are using the word flesh to indicate our old, sinful nature.

In Greek the word employed is *sarx*, in Latin it is *carne*. It is from the Latin *carne*, that we get the word carnal, but also the words incarnate and incarnation! You probably get the point! The word is employed in several ways, and we need to understand the meaning from the context in which it appears.

We also need to avoid the error of assuming that all flesh, or physical being, is intrinsically evil. This is a piece of Greek philosophy, not a biblical teaching. God made us as physical beings: He is the one that gave Adam and Eve bodies of flesh. There is nothing inherently wrong with a physical body. Some have even tried to deny that Jesus really did have a physical body. John writes about them in 2 John 7, *“For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh.”* When our key verse for today declares that, *“God was manifest in the flesh”*, (1 Timothy 3:16), it most definitely is **not** telling us that God, in Christ, took on any trace of sin! It is telling us that He took on a human body as part of His becoming fully a man. I’m choosing my words carefully here. Christ did not simply inhabit a human body, while remaining exclusively divine. He became a man, while remaining fully divine, and taking a human body was, and is, part of that becoming man. Notice my use of the present tense. Christ still has a body today. It is now a resurrection body, of the kind we will receive in glory after the Lord’s return, but it is still a body. The Son remains incarnate, and will do so for all eternity, it was not a temporary experience while He was in this world.

These are difficult concepts for us to grasp. Just how Christ became (and remains!), fully man, while remaining fully God, is not something I can explain in any detail. But it **is** something that the Bible states quite explicitly. It is one of those things, like the trinity, that we need to accept from God and reason out from, rather attempt to rationalise and explain how it all functions in detail. John had seen the Lord Jesus and lived alongside Him for over two years, but you can still sense the wonder he had some 50 years or so later when he writes, *“That ... which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled...”* (1 John 1:1). I imagine John pondering how it could possibly be that the one Who was the eternal Word, the invisible God, could be heard, seen, gazed on, even touched! That is what happened after the Word ‘became flesh’. For me, this rolls the wonder of Christmas and the horror and glory of Easter, all into one bewilderingly lovely combination of grace and truth. God as a tiny, helpless baby in an animal feeding trough, takes my breath away. Christ taking His now adult body, to a cross and dying to accomplish the forgiveness of sins, defies all description or classification. The fact that both of these things were for **my** benefit, and the benefit of countless others like me, and that Father and Son planned Christ coming in the flesh for precisely this purpose, is beyond all words.

Christianity simply could not exist if these things were not true. Think how many of the things the New Testament teaches require the incarnation for them to be accomplished. I only have time to run through a few of them.

- Forgiveness of sins;
- New life;
- Christ as mediator;
- Christ our Great High Priest; and
- Christ our pattern for Christian life.

Forgiveness of sins

The Passover lamb had to be sacrificed before it could protect the family that offered it (see Exodus 12:1-28). We have already spoken about how Christ became flesh, so that He might die as a sacrifice. God is spirit and God is immortal. As such, He cannot conceivably die. But Romans 6:23 reminds us *“The wages of sin is death”* and Romans 3:25-26 tell us, *“God set forth [Christ Jesus] as a propitiation by His blood (that is His death) ..., that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”* Hebrews 9:22 makes plain, *“Without [the] shedding of blood there is no remission.”* Apart from Christ taking on flesh, there could be no possibility of death, or shedding of blood, and therefore no possibility of the forgiveness of our sins!

New life

We read in Romans 6:4-8, *“Therefore we were buried with [Christ] through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection... Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him.”* The symbol of our baptism teaches us the truth that we died with Christ when He died for us, and that when He rose from the dead, we rose in newness of life with Him.

No Christ in the flesh = no death = no resurrection = no new life for you and me!

Christ as mediator

1 Timothy 2:5 reads, *“For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus.”* If God was not manifest in flesh in the person of Christ, then there **is** no Man Christ Jesus, and there is no mediator!

Christ our Great High Priest

This is one of the great themes of the epistle to the Hebrews, to which the writer returns again and again. We just have time for a snippet from Hebrews 2:14-18: *“Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same ... Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest ... For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted.”* Christ knows the limitations and temptations that living in a human body presents. The wonderful reassurance is that He knows **by personal experience** the struggles we face. The One that appears in God’s presence on our behalf, comprehensively understands our frailty from the inside.

Christ our pattern for Christian life

- *“Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps”,* 1 Peter 2:21;
- *“He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked”,* 1 John 2:6; and
- *“What is that to you? You follow Me”,* John 21:22.

These verses remind us of our obligation to follow Christ and live for Him and like Him. That finally brings us back round to where I began! What do you live for? Why not let the Christ who was God manifested in the flesh, produce godliness in **your** life in the flesh? That will fulfil the grand purpose for which you were made: enjoying a close relationship with the Father and representing Him in this world.

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